In today's globalised world, where the interdependence is intense and complex, Global Governance, or paucity of it, is a serious challenge before humanity. Discussions on how to deal with transnational issues—whether they be trade liberalisation or investment, pandemics or drug trafficking, climate change or environment, human rights or responsibility to protect—all these seriously affect the lives of billions of people.

With the world rendered virtually borderless because of high speed transfers of goods, capital, pathogens and environmental consequences, the lack of Global Governance has emerged as the single most daunting challenge to Globalisation.

Even though the term ‘global governance’ is relatively new, the concept, in a general way, has existed for a long time in history. Whenever two or more entities—call them societies, tribes or groups of people—had regular interactions, some kind of ground rules had to be laid out. There may not have been an implementing agency, but there was an understanding that such rules were beneficial for all. What we talk of global governance today stems from this fundamental concept. Sure, over the centuries, circumstances have changed. The creation of Westphalian states in the 17th century led to rather rigid entities
which had to deal with each other. As each one of them fought and pushed for its self-interest, some common ground rules evolved which everyone, or more precisely, the more important players, agreed on as being good for all. These were in the areas of trade, shipping and health. It is said that what precipitated the Berlin Conference in 1885 (which led to the division of the African continent into colonial territories) was the increase in the number of confrontations between ships of rival powers in the Congo River. It is of course a truism to state that historically global rules have been set by the most powerful countries to take care of their interests.

The post-second World War period saw global governance rules set by the victors. Even though the second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of a large number of independent nations in Asia and Africa, they hardly contributed to global governance. Obviously, they were neither politically nor economically powerful enough to influence or change the set patterns of global governance.

What has changed since then? The magic word is “globalisation”. This process has managed to interlink countries in ways unimagined in the past. James Roseneau has referred to this as “the crazy-quilt nature of modern interdependence”. What globalisation has done is to create a virtually borderless world with high velocity of movements of goods, capital, technology, diseases, criminals, drugs and environmental disasters. Today no nation can honestly say that none of these affect it. Hence, global governance or lack of it has achieved great significance as the most important challenge before humankind.

The other major outcome of globalisation is the emergence of new economic players. Many refer to it as the shift of the economic fulcrum from the developed world to the developing one. This is a remarkable shift since the emerging economies managed to play the game of globalisation by the rules set by the developed world and yet achieve considerable success. But have they been able to gain commensurate influence in global governance? The answer is in the
negative. Some even feel that the term ‘emerging powers’ does not adequately reflect their geo-political significance.

Let us try to understand what is really meant by global governance. There are many definitions but none gives the complete picture. James Rosenau defines global governance as “a system of rules at all levels of human activity from the family to the international organisation”. By this definition, practically nothing is excluded. What is to be noted is that governance, in this context, should not be confused with government. It is precisely because there is no global government that there is need for global governance. In some ways this works in the opposite direction as compared to what happens within Westphalian states. There, the institution (government) precedes governance whereas on a global level it is the other way around. The idea of governance precedes the formation of an institution. Another definition of global governance is “governing, without sovereign authority, relationships that transcend national frontiers”. The simplest and the most practical definition is “management of transnational issues through voluntary international cooperation”. It is about managing issues without a formal government.

While talking of global governance, one has to be clear of the three specific aspects – values, norms and rules. Effective global governance which is fair and equitable should pay attention to all the three aspects in that order and have, if not global consensus, at least the agreement of an overwhelmingly large majority of nations. Only then will the fourth aspect of governance, namely implementation, be effective and just.

Many problems in global governance have arisen because of the lack of attention to the three stages namely values, norms and rules or the by-passing of some of them. We have to only look at the controversies concerning human rights, non-proliferation, responsibility to protect or the International Criminal Court to
appreciate the importance of the correct sequencing of the three stages in global
governance.

History shows that Global Governance always lags behind developments in
technology, trade, travel, pandemics and environmental problems. Countries
wake up to these issues only when they reach crisis proportions. Therefore,
global governance should be visualised as a dynamic concept with constant
monitoring and modifications.

The other term that had obtained currency in today's age is “global commons”
and this is closely associated with global governance. This is generally meant to
cover universal assets like oceans, atmosphere and outer space. Even this
concept is not new. As early as the 17th century, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius
developed the argument that oceans were international space. In today's context,
we may have to include Cyber Space. With the greater interdependence of the
economies of so many countries, the question of managing the global commons
in an equitable way has become an absolute necessity.

Another factor to be kept in mind is that in today's world, global governance is
not only about the governments of sovereign states. There are important non-
state players who contribute significantly. Three of them are the corporate
sector, the civil societies and the non-government organisations. Any new
initiative on global governance today cannot succeed without bringing on board
these stakeholders.

What can we learn from the history of global governance? There have been
many success stories like coordination of telegraph communications, maritime
understandings and health issues like either containing or preventing
communicable diseases. One ideal example of global coordination among the
private sector is the agreement of all GSM operators throughout the world to use
the number 112 for emergency services. The examples in the financial sector are
SWIFT (Society for World Inter-Bank Financial Telecommunication) and IBAN (International Bank Account Number). On the government side we have the example of Interpol which makes annually over 5000 arrests of criminals and fugitive law-breakers from member countries.

The above examples show that success in Global Governance is possible if the discourse on the subject is not restricted to subjective moralistic principles, but takes into account the incentives for all to cooperate—ie. a more practical approach. New initiatives are more likely to succeed if all stake-holders feel that there is something in them for everyone.

Such successes not withstanding, global governance runs into difficulty over sensitive issues. These are questions on which countries disagree because they see them as affecting their vital interests. There are issues where the definition of the value itself is in question – like human rights, responsibility to protect and climate change. While nobody questions the fundamental principle involved, the devil, as they say, lies in the details. Even if there is, with difficulty, an agreement on the values, governance runs into difficulty because of different perceptions about the norms and the rules.

One aspect which is central to global governance is the question of institutions which oversee the implementation of the rules. That has become the most crucial issue of debate in today’s world; and for obvious reasons. Most of the institutions created in the 20th century represented a certain bias towards the colonial powers and the victors of the Second World War. It is only natural that the victors set the rules and implemented them to their advantage without much regard for the adverse effects on others. This worked well as long as the global situation remained static. The end of the Cold War and the age of globalisation brought in a new paradigm which exposed the weaknesses of many of the aspects of global governance in existence. The time had come to have a fresh look at trans-national issues.
While talking of global institutions, three of them stand out as being totally anachronistic—IMF, World Bank and UNSC. The quota allocations and the voting powers in IMF and World Bank have no relationship to the existing distribution of economic power in today's world. Add to that the unwritten convention that IMF will always be headed by an European and the World Bank by an American. How can one expect the institutions to run efficiently and address complex issues when there are such outdated rules? Today, of all the important international institutions, G-20 seems to be the only one which correctly reflects the global reality—the 20 countries account for 85% of the global GDP.

The UNSC is another institution which is clearly out of sync. with the times. For it to be effective, it has to represent the current global reality which it does not. Most people agree on the need to expand the UNSC, but the idea has not seen any progress in the last two decades.

Let us also be clear that this is not the first time that ex-colonies and the so called ‘developing world’ clamoured for changes in the global order. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the New International Economic Order and the New International Information order, all during the Cold War days, were tentative steps in this direction. They did not gather enough momentum because the combined political and economic strengths of these countries were not sufficient to effect any significant transformation.

All this changes with globalisation. The shift in the economic strength to some emerging powers has changed the nature of the game altogether. That is where a group like BRICS attains significance as a promoter of new changes in global governance. These are various questions that arise. What does BRICS want? Is BRICS capable of bringing about meaningful changes? Can BRICS convince the status-quo powers that some changes are in the interests of everyone?
BRICS and other emerging powers speak with a common voice on the issue of global governance?

Much has been said and written about the growing profile of BRICS and there is no need to reiterate it here. What is relevant is the fact that BRICS has attained a certain level of credibility and maturity to contribute effectively to global governance. A list of four countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) put together by Goldman Sachs as the fastest growing economies and the most promising investment destinations are today much more than that. The proof of this, if any at all was required, is the inclusion of South Africa into the group thus covering all the continents. The agenda of BRICS today is both wide and forward-looking. Even if they do not claim themselves to be the spokesmen of the emerging and developing countries, it is a fact that many of them look towards BRICS as natural partners in their pursuit of sustainable development.

The argument of lack of cohesion or “glue” among BRICS is wearing thin. Look at the intra-BRICS trade for eg. – Yes, it may be a small component of global trade but since 2001, intra-BRICS trade has grown at an average of 28 per cent per year and has increased by nearly 15 times since the inception of the group to reach $230 billion in 2011. The expectation is to reach $500 billion by 2015. It is a reality that BRICS countries will have both competition and cooperation at the same time. The idea is to seek and work on convergences while competing in other areas. This is not new in international politics. During the heydays of OECD, US, EU and Japan competed intensely in the economic and commercial fields; yet they had a common strategic vision on many global issues and ways to tackle them. What prevents BRICS from following a similar approach?

The other important point of interest is that the very non-cohesiveness of BRICS could make the group a credible interlocutor and initiator of reforms in global governance. It could be argued that since it is not a rigid alliance or bloc, it does not have to push the agenda of any particular group.
BRICS’ interest in global governance is also not about “high-tables” which have been mentioned repeatedly in commentaries. While it is important for emerging powers to be members of the international decision making bodies, it is not an end in itself. Repeated references to “occupying the high tables”, in a way, trivialises the issue. The question of what is debated and decided at the high tables is as important, if not more critical, than who sits there. The BRICS countries have a fairly clear vision of what direction they would take when they are invited to these tables. The best example in this regard is the achievement of BRICS in G-20 on the question of quota allocations and voting rights of countries in the IMF and World Bank. The decisions of the Seoul G-20 Summit are just the beginning and BRICS will have to keep up the momentum.

Multilateralism is the bedrock of good global governance. All the five BRICS countries are staunch supporters of this approach. They are also averse to threat or use of force in solving issues.

Some critics have projected the interest of the emerging countries in a transfer of powers on global governance merely as the desire of the elite of those countries to achieve a certain level of recognition. Nothing could be more absurd. In today’s globalised world, the decisions taken on global issues by the concerned international organisations affect the lives and development of millions of people. Look at the intensity of discussions on issues like climate change, Doha Round of trade liberalisation, food security, water issues, responsibility to protect and human rights. We come back to the questions of values, norms and rules in all these where the emerging and developing countries have a vital stake in the formulation of the concepts from the very beginning.

BRICS countries have also made it clear that their demand for changes in global governance is inclusive and non-confrontational. It should not be seen as the West vs. the rest. Even if, for argument sake, one concedes that the global order
created after the Second World War had some logic of that time, it is evident that
the world has changed qualitatively and in a drastic manner. No amount of
tinkering of the old systems can help; we need some creative ideas from all the
stakeholders. It needed a crisis like the 2008 global financial meltdown for
activating G20 to take some steps where BRICS and other emerging powers
were brought in the decision making process leading to some beneficial
outcomes. Should the world wait for such crisis in other sectors before initiating
reforms or is it prudent to start reviewing the existing structures and methods
with the involvement of all?

To conclude: Global Governance in today’s world is vital and critical for the lives
of billions. Hence it has to involve everyone. Any governance to be effective has
to be and seen to be fair and equitable. Since the old systems are not, it is time to
review and reform them. A group of emerging powers like BRICS is ideally
suited to bring fresh and creative ideas to the table. They have the experience of
going through the development process, taking advantage of globalisation and
registering impressive growth rates. Yet, many of their problems are very
similar to other developing countries. Hence, they are in the unique position of
understanding the issues in the right perspective while having the strength to
take on more responsibilities in global governance.

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